Peanut Butter and Homework Sandwiches is a delightful book about a child, Martin MacGregor, who has every intention of doing his homework. However, the unthinkable happens each time and he ends up not having any homework to turn in to the substitute, Mrs. Payne. Martin learns to appreciate his classroom teacher in his absence and establishes his own self-discipline in the meantime when Mr. Elliott has to take an unexpected leave due to a mountain climbing incident. Mr. Elliott’s substitute for the week was duly named Mrs. Payne. Mrs. Payne’s legacy is apparently assigning homework, and Martin sees no need for this nonsense.

Peanut Butter and Homework Sandwiches addresses several issues of relevance to children. One is the ability to make up excuses for not completing a task. Another issue in the forefront of today’s society is the role of bullies and especially the role they play in schools. In this case, it’s Samuel Hall, “the taker of everyone’s dessert” (unpaged). Martin learns that excuses, although true, may not be accepted if they can’t be proven true. Children may also learn from this book that they can decide what’s important to themselves and pursue those interests in addition to what’s required. Martin also demonstrates a
rarity in that he does what is asked of him by Mrs. Payne even though he disagrees and is telling the truth about his bad luck with assignments.

There are some non-traditional conventions to this story in that there are not the typical three events but four (one for each day homework was due). However, there are some rather traditional attributes in that the male saves the day (by returning to the classroom); the villain, although not stereotypical of folktale characters, is Mrs. Payne (reminiscent of an evil stepmother), and it is assumed that mother and sister will not like spiders (girls don’t like bugs). I think the story would take on a different meaning had the roles been reversed; it is something to think about in twenty-first-century classrooms.

My first graders enjoyed this book very much. I asked them to respond in writing to the book and many mentioned the dog Sadie as one of their favorite parts, which isn’t surprising since most of them enjoy animals at this age. They were excited to know that the author had a dog named Sadie, which made it even more meaningful. Many of them also enjoyed the illustration that showed Martin running down the stairs with no pants in his purple underwear. Interestingly, some of the girls expressed an interest in Martin mistakenly taking his sister’s doll to school because he had her backpack and she had his.

Overall, this is an excellent book with many uses in the classroom. Now that winter is upon us, I would like to use Martin MacGregor Snowman by Cook as well.

Work Cited


About the Author

Al Enlow is a first grade teacher at Cumberland School in West Lafayette, Indiana. He has been teaching for 15 years and has teaching experience in grades one through six. His Bachelor’s degree is from Manchester College while his Master’s degree is from Purdue University. A former guest lecturer and teaching assistant in Purdue’s College of Education, Al resides in West Lafayette.